

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1.

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White House plans major intelligence buildup

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The White House has approved a five-year plan which would substantially strengthen American intelligence agencies across the board, according to administration officials.

The officials say that the plan grew primarily out of a conviction that budgetary and manpower limitations had for more than a decade prevented the spy agencies from keeping up adequately with a rapidly changing, more dangerous world. The plan, which would lead to the hiring of more analysts, scientists, and secret operatives by the intelligence agencies, is reported to have the support of the nation's top intelligence officers.

The officials told this reporter the plan would give the intelligence agencies a greater increase in funds over the next several years, in percentage terms, than increases now scheduled for the defense budget as a whole. The defense budget is to increase by 7 percent in real terms each year for the next five years.

Increases for the intelligence agencies will apparently mean not only more manpower, but also more technical capabilities, such as spy satellites, for example, and an increased ability to conduct secret operations overseas. In the case of the US Central Intelligence Agency, the Reagan administration's main concern at this point appears to be an effort to improve the quality of intelligence analysis reaching policymakers.

Administration officials feel confident that key senators and congressmen will go along with the intelligence "rebuilding" plan, which has been in the making for some months now. The full details of the intelligence agencies' budget are only known to top administration officials and to congressional oversight committees.

Published speculation on the subject has placed the intelligence agencies' budget at around \$10 billion for 1980-81. A good part of that budget is said to go to the technological side of intelligence gathering.

Nearly a dozen government agencies are involved in intelligence gathering, with the CIA taking only a relatively small percentage of the total budget, officials say. America's biggest intelligence agency is the supersecret electronic snooping organization, the National Security Agency (NSA).

The question of possibly revealing to the public details of the intelligence agencies' total annual budget — it is now mostly hidden

within the Defense Department budget — has been debated within the US Congress. But the executive branch has thus far argued successfully that it might be of use to adversaries of the US, and the Soviet Union, in particular, to know the full details. Officials contend that with such details, the Soviets might be able to plot trends and develop new methods of countering the US spy agencies.

A number of key senators and congressmen were highly critical of those spy agencies in the early and mid-1970s. Never before had any major nation argued out in public, to such a degree, the virtues and vices of its intelligence agencies.

But over the past several years, the pendulum seems to have swung on Capitol Hill in favor of strengthening the intelligence agencies. The causes for this are many. They include disillusionment with the results of US-Soviet détente and a feeling that the world has become a more dangerous place because of a number of developments — the fall of the Shah of Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the loss of US nuclear superiority, among them.

While administration officials continue to decline to give full details of intelligence agency spending, meanwhile, they do give just enough to argue their case for rebuilding. They say that such spy agency spending reached a peak during the Vietnam war years, when large number of intelligence officers were deployed in Southeast Asia.

From the late 1960s onward, according to official accounts, there was a steady manpower "drawdown" in most sectors of intelligence gathering. According to one account, the manpower decrease at the CIA among both analysts and so-called case officers — the people who run foreign agents — has come to about 25 percent over the past 10 to 15 years.

Some former intelligence officers claim that the CIA's ability to engage in successful "covert action," or secret action aimed at influencing political conditions in other nations, had eroded to the point in recent years where it was virtually nonexistent.

There was reported to have been a limited revival of covert action during the last year or two of the Carter administration, most of it apparently in the propaganda field. Frustration over the fall of the Shah of Iran, the taking of American hostages in Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan helped to generate pressures for a return to some of the cloak-and-dagger operations of the past.

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